DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 386 341 RC 020 079

AUTHOR Pulver, Glen C.
TITLE Elements of a Sustainable Rural Policy.
PUB DATE Jan 95
NOTE 11p.; In: Increasing Understanding of Public Problems and Policies, 1994. National Public Policy Education Conference; see RC 020 070.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Needs; *Futures (of Society); *Policy Formation; Politics; *Public Policy; *Quality of Life; *Rural Areas; Rural Development; Rural Economics; Rural Urban Differences; Sociocultural Patterns; *Sustainable Development

ABSTRACT

If a new and effective rural policy is to be crafted, policymakers must realize that rural America has changed a great deal in recent years. To be sustainable, rural policy must be flexible enough to accommodate continuing changes in global structure; be sufficiently targeted to address the unique concerns found in diverse rural situations; provide for long-term improvement in human living standards through natural resource management, technological innovation, and institutional change; and attract political support from both rural and urban residents. This will require more active participation and cooperation in policy formulation by citizens of the wider rural community; increased interaction between rural and urban policymakers; and more holistic consideration of investments in production, ecological, and institutional innovation. Farmers, timber workers, and miners will need to seek common ground and build alliances with others who have broader agendas (rural developers, environmentalists, human rights activists). Public and private sector scientists with an interest in agriculture, the environment, and other rural related issues will need to collaborate more in order to be fully aware of the broader consequences of their work. Consequently, the charting of a new and more sustainable rural policy poses a tremendous challenge for everyone concerned about the future well-being of rural America. A national policy focusing on continuing education and technical assistance for local decision makers would cost relatively little and could serve as the foundation for sound sustainable development. (TD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

STEVE A. HALBROOK

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 386 341

ELEMENTS OF A SUSTAINABLE RURAL POLICY

Glen C. Pulver
University of Wisconsin, Retired

The crafting of a national policy addressing the contemporary concerns of rural America is an important and challenging task. The demand for a new rural policy is driven by the fact that the economic situation of most of the one in five Americans who live in rural regions is now deteriorating in comparison to that of their urban neighbors. This, after decades when the personal incomes of rural residents were gradually approaching those of city dwellers. In addition, some of the nation's most intransigent poor live in scattered rural regions across the country. The recent decline in rural economic well-being has occurred in spite of the continued existence of national agricultural support programs and the fact that a large share of the nation's most precious natural resources are located in rural America.

The reengineering of effective rural policy is complicated by a multitude of changes in economic dependency and human migration patterns. Many rural residents have had to give up their familiar "way-of-life," seek new jobs, and move to unfamiliar surroundings in order to survive economically. Others have stayed where they are, unable to move because of a lack of knowledge and resources or because of historic cultural imperatives. All too often their economic situation has become ever more bleak.

Rural policy formulation has also been affected by important shifts in public expectations generated by more widespread sensitivity to long-term ecological concerns. All rural residents, the well-to-do and the poor, have been forced to break familiar habits and practices in order to accommodate the increasingly intrusive demands of policies aimed at improving "public well-being." In the process, all have given up a bit of their treasured sense of individual independence. In short, those who live in rural America know that things are not what they used to be. Neither is the broader setting in which rural policy is to be forged.

Facing the Facts

If a new and effective rural policy is to be crafted, policymakers must face the fact that rural America has changed a great deal in recent years. Four critical differences come immediately to mind: 1) continuous restructuring of the global economy has had a strong impact on the competitiveness of most rural industries; 2) rural regions

RC020079

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

are now much less homogeneous than they once were; 3) there is increasing national emphasis on environmental sustainability; and 4) rural residents are becoming ever smaller political minorities across the United States.

The first two changes, the impacts of global economic restructuring and the increased diversity of rural regions, have been widely treated elsewhere in the literature (Brown et al.; Flora and Christenson; Joint Economic Committee). For the most part, they are generally accepted as fact although not always accounted for in policy development. They will be dealt with in only a cursory manner in this paper. The latter two, the increasing national emphasis on sustainability, and the decline in rural political emphasis, will receive more attention.

The Consequences of Global Restructuring

Throughout most of its history, rural America has been largely dependent on its abundant natural resource base for economic sustenance. Farmers have tilled its soils, timber workers have harvested its forests, and miners have extracted its minerals. For many years, these natural-resource-based industries, especially agriculture, have been the dominant source of rural family income. But increased production efficiency and global restructuring have had a tremendous impact on the economic reality of most rural regions. Fuller et al. put it succinctly: "Global restructuring . . . can be simply characterized by the changing pace and scale of global economic and political linkages and the profound reorganization of peoples' daily lives and lifetime career paths" (p. 1).

The growing influence of international financial markets; shifts in the spatial structure of manufacturing industries; major changes in the scale and structure of retailing; rapid expansion in the demand for services; increased human mobility through improved transportation; dramatic developments in telecommunication; and substantial improvement in the incomes and life expectancy of many of world's elderly challenge the autonomy of all regions and nations (Fuller et al.). As a result, rural America is now more economically dependent on employment in manufacturing and services; and on income from investments and transfer payments than it is from employment and income derived directly from agriculture (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Summer, 1993).

Rural America can no longer rely on national farm policy as its primary base of income-oriented policy. Sound farm policy remains an important part of rural policy, but it is far from sufficient to address even a small portion of current rural concerns. Contemporary rural policy must be more comprehensive if it is to be effective. Among other things, it must address issues relating to nonfarm economic development including public infrastructure and nonfarm finance.

Global economic and political restructuring is not at an end. Quite the contrary, the rate of international economic change is apt to increase, thus having an even more profound effect in the future on the lives of all people, rural and urban. If a reengineered rural policy is to have any length of life, it must accommodate this economic and social change.

Rural Diversity

Rural America is extremely diverse in sources and levels of economic well-being (Brown et al.; Flora and Christenson). Roughly 22 percent of its nonmetropolitan counties are considered farm dependent; 40 percent manufacturing dependent; 20 percent are retirement dependent and the remainder some mixture of income sources (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1993; Reeder and Glasgow).

While farmers in general have higher incomes than the average American, many rural residents are the poorest in the nation. Numbered among the poorest are many African-Americans in the Delta South, Hispanic-Americans in the southwest, scattered bands of Native-Americans in the Great Plains and the southwest, and Caucasian-Americans in remote rural regions throughout the country (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Fall, 1993).

The quality of human resources is also irregular across rural regions. Educational levels vary from those with easy access to high-quality educational systems, to those with very poor educational institutions. Dropout rates are near zero in some rural communities and only a few graduate from high school in others (Hobbs; Long). Access to adequate health care is irregular at best. Many rural residents are well-covered by health insurance and near first-rate health care providers while others remain uninsured or at great distances from even rudimentary health care. Some rural residents are well-attended by 911 emergency services while others are essentially on their own (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Spring, 1993).

The geography of rural regions is equally diverse. Access to economic and social opportunity is readily available to most rural residents who live within an easy commute of cities of 15,000 or more people. These communities are sufficiently large to provide the amenities and services necessary to attract or sustain good nonfarm employment opportunities. They are large enough to support good health care facilities, higher education institutions, job training agencies and diverse cultural opportunities (Deaton et al.). Today, one in four rural residents lives in more remote regions where the provision of basic economic and social institutions are quite costly on a per capita basis (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Fall, 1993). Although urban areas contain a large share of the nation's poor, they do not suffer the problems associated with geographical remoteness.

Many rural residents are limited by cultural imperatives in their

capacity to migrate to places of greater economic opportunity. An attachment to the land—the foundation of many Native-American cultures, but also a strongly felt part of the values of most small farmers and timber workers—makes migration to urban regions extremely difficult for some. Thus, the consideration of place remains a powerful factor in the development of rural policy.

Any reengineering of rural policy must account for this great diversity. "One-size-fits-all" programs will not accomplish desired rural policy goals. Current initiatives, focused on providing assistance to the 500 most economically-depressed rural counties, may be a step in the proper direction (Stauber). Care must be taken to recognize the great diversity existent within these counties and the fact that many rural residents in the remaining 2,600+ U.S. counties are also in need of some attention.

Sustainability as a Policy Objective

The objectives of national policy are driven by contemporary problems and guided by generally accepted human values. As problems change, so do the concerns of policymakers. As values change, so do the assessments of contemporary problems and the range of acceptable solutions.

Castle indicates there have been at least three distinct policy eras relating to rural America (1993, p. 14). During the first era, rural policy was focused on overcoming space, encouraging settlement and creating opportunity in rural areas. Mail service for rural areas, rural roads, and the creation of land grant universities were all aspects of rural policy in that era. The second era, which began at the turn of the century, emphasized managing forests for long-term economic use and the development of water for the creation of economic opportunity. The third era, which started in the depths of the Great Depression, saw the start of public support for rural electrification, soil conservation, farm credit and agricultural price supports.

Castle argues that these policies were, for the most part, designed to benefit farmers and other rural residents. These policies were accepted throughout the country because of a general desire for expansion of the nation's wealth through settlement of rural regions and to assure an adequate supply of food and fiber for all. Castle goes on to argue that conditions have changed and so must rural policies.

The current abundance of food and fiber, as indicated by government farm commodity purchases and payments to landholders for not producing crops, has changed the rural policy environment. Many people are now questioning the need for continued government investment in production-enhancing technology, even though it may be cost effective. Furthermore, there is growing concern with

the long-range social and environmental impacts of many of the production practices in current use. This concern relates not only to agriculture, but to forestry, mining, manufacturing, construction, tourism and all other economic endeavors.

Sustainability is a popular concept that has risen largely out of the growing concern for the environment (Batie). Perhaps the most often-cited definition of sustainability is, "meeting the needs of the present, without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their needs." contained in the 1987 report, *Our Common Future*, produced by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (Johnson and Bauen; van Kooten, pp. 162-187). The concept of sustainability has become a central part of far-flung policy discussions.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has used the term in referring to the need for sustainable rural development policy which "focuses on rural development efforts that combine the creation of economic opportunity for poor or declining communities with efforts designed to restore or protect important ecological resources" (Stauber). This usage addresses both the issue of economic disadvantage and environmental protection.

The concept of sustainability has become quite popular in reference to systems of production agriculture. For example, the U.S. Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990 states that sustainable agriculture is: "An integrated system of plant and animal production practices having a site specific application that will, over the long term: satisfy human food and fiber needs; enhance environmental quality and the natural resource base upon which the agricultural economy depends; make the most efficient use of nonrenewable resources and on-farm resources and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls; sustain the economic viability of farm operation; and enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole" (Helmers and Hoag).

Similar definitions could and probably have been applied to a wide spectrum of industries besides agriculture. It appears that to "sustain the economic viability of farm operation" implies that the current number of farmers should be maintained. How realistic is the expectation that national policy can sustain the current number of farmers, grocers, autoworkers or any other segment of the economy for long? Sustainability does not imply permanence for all occupations or communities (Fuller et al.).

Fuller et al. introduce the concept of community involvement in their description of sustainability. They, like others, indicate that sustainability is "a shorthand way of encompassing the range of issues that need to be included in our development agenda as we face up to the social, economic and environmental realities of our times—and those of our children" (Fuller et al., p. 41). While most of

their arguments parallel those of the others cited here, they make the important additional point that sustainable development programs will fail if left solely to the experts. They argue, "Community is the prerequisite condition for the reinforcement of sustainable attitudes and practices. Only when people feel collectively linked to a positive future is a rationality of sustainability likely to replace a rationality of expendability and impermanence" (Fuller et al., p. 45).

In an article addressing the goals of the Endangered Species Act, Eisgruber refers to sustainable development as "taken to mean a positive rate of change in the quality of life of people based on a system that permits this positive rate of change to be maintained indefinitely" (Eisgruber, p. 4). He postulates that the "quality of life is determined by the magnitudes of the natural resource endowment, the technical resource endowment, and the institutional resource endowment" (Eisgruber, p. 4). This definition introduces two important concepts: 1) future generations should expect a higher quality of life; and 2) although natural resource endowments may be relatively fixed, technical and institutional endowments are not. As a consequence of technological development and institutional change, future generations may actually have a higher quality of living even after reductions in the current endowments of natural resources. However, it may be necessary "to rethink social institutions that generate technologies and production systems that are destructive of ourselves and the environment" (Fuller et al., p. 43). Sustainability is a dynamic concept, far from simply maintaining the status quo.

Rural Regions as a Political Minority

Gone are the days when state and national legislative bodies were dominated by rural political interests. Today the U.S. Congress and most state legislatures are more strongly influenced by urban and suburban interests. Less than two percent of the people in the United States actually live on farms. A high percentage of these farm families are now more dependent upon nonfarm income than from farming (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1993). Twenty percent of the members of the House of Representatives are from districts with nonmetropolitan voters in the majority. Fifteen of the fifty U.S. Senators are from states with a nonmetropolitan majority (Jahr). While the influence of farm interests is waning, the broader rural population continues to represent a strong minority.

This does not mean that farming, forestry and mining-related businesses are unimportant. Quite the contrary. The entire nation depends on them and they are primary income sources in some regions. It simply means that in politics, votes count. Political representatives must pay close attention to the specific interests of those they represent. It is entirely logical that they invest more time and political capital, including their policy choices, on behalf of the largest share of their constituency. Rural residents as a whole are

likewise a minority in the United States. Nonetheless, they constitute a majority or a strong minority share in many more congressional districts and states than do farmers, timber workers and miners.

Although the collective political influence of all rural Americans is potentially stronger than that of agricultural interests alone, it will be much weaker than that of urban residents for the foreseeable future. Thus, in order to gain national support, policies aimed at the concerns of rural regions "need to reflect the unique features of rural regions and societies, but they must not be viewed in policy context as being independent of the remainder of the nation and its economy" (Castle, 1992, p. 7). "Many of our current rural policies are justified by social norms or concepts that may no longer be fully valid for significant, growing parts of the American electorate" (Stauber, p. 3).

In order to gain the necessary political support on a sustained basis, future national political actions aimed at specific rural concerns may be achievable only as a part of legislation aimed at broader national problems. For example, programs aimed at improving rural housing are likely to become a part of broader housing legislation rather than as a part of a rural bill. Separate legislation aimed primarily at agricultural concerns, such as the farm bill, may be unable to garner sufficient political support for passage. Should this become a reality, it will be imperative that most national legislation be analyzed for its differential impact on rural and urban areas and appropriate compensation considered.

Programs aimed only at rural problems may experience some success in the near term but are apt to encounter serious political difficulty in the long run. In all cases they will be subject to intense scrutiny regarding issues of productivity, social stability and environmental sustainability. At this time, it is difficult to perceive of the farm bill as only a small part of a broader national economic improvement bill, but the time may come when it will be necessary to justify farm programs and supportive agricultural institutions in a manner that parallels those of other industries.

A New Sustainable Rural Policy

The time may be ripe for the formulation of new rural policies that break away from conventional concepts such as rural primacy, technological necessity, and price dependency. This is not to suggest that these concepts were or are totally inappropriate. But, by viewing rural conditions in the light of these concepts, policymakers may restrict their vision of the full range of policy alternatives. In today's policy setting, the very process of assessing rural policy objectives as a part of a set of national goals is more likely to lead to a more sustainable rural policy.

In their most rudimentary form, the national goals of the United

States of America simply assure everyone in the nation the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. To achieve these ends it is generally agreed that everyone should have access to a good education, economic opportunity, a clean environment, cultural opportunity, ease of transportation, unfettered communication, adequate health care, basic housing and personal security. These goals can clearly serve as the goals of a new rural policy.

The development of a national policy that assures people in all regions that their local governmental and quasi-governmental bodies (e.g.. village boards, industrial development corporations, business associations, planning commissions) are well-informed when making local policy decisions is a prime example of a national policy which, if properly implemented, would serve rural regions well. It is generally conceded that the most critical concern in rural regions today is the lack of well-informed local leadership (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1992; Stauber). Community groups throughout the nation are constantly attempting to solve unique local problems. Unfortunately these efforts all too often lead to frustrating failure. Either the problem is not properly identified, the facts are wrong, the full range of options not known, or an inappropriate approach taken.

Rural regions are at a distinct disadvantage in accessing the requisite knowledge to help them make proper choices when compared to their urban counterparts. First, because of their smaller population and less diverse industrial base, rural policymakers tend to possess a narrower range of knowledge. Second, access to the needed knowledge is reduced by sheer distance; rural areas are generally far from centers of specialized information and technical assistance. Third, rural areas simply have less financial capacity to hire specialists in public finance, economic development, natural resource assessment, human resources and other fields to help them in decision making (Pulver and Dodson). A different but equally important set of disadvantages restricting knowledge access might be identified for some urban neighborhoods. If all areas, urban and rural, are to share equitably in America's prosperity, these disadvantages must be overcome.

A national policy focusing on continuing education and technical assistance for local decisionmakers would cost relatively little and serve as the foundation for sound sustainable development. The unique disadvantages of rural regions and urban neighborhoods could be accounted for. There are several excellent case examples that have demonstrated the value of this kind of investment (Pulver and Dodson). This is consistent with the historic national value set which argues that full knowledge is a fundamental aspect of effective democratic and free enterprise systems.

Similar analyses might be applied to issues of access to safe water, telecommunications, health care, highways and bridges, environmental protection and other items high on the national agenda.

BEST CO

Unique rural problems and solutions could be defined in the process. The chances of inadvertently injuring rural regions through ill-informed national decisionmaking (e.g., lower hospital reimbursement rates in rural regions) might also be reduced. Thus, sustainable rural policy could become an integral part of national policy.

Summary

In summary, to be sustainable, rural policy must be flexible enough to accommodate continuing changes in global structure; sufficiently targeted to address the unique concerns found in diverse rural situations; provide for long-term growth in human living standards through natural resource management, technological innovation and institutional change; and attract political support from both rural and urban residents. This will require more active participation and cooperation in policy formulation by citizens of the wider rural community; increased interaction between rural and urban policymakers; and more holistic consideration of investments in production, ecological and institutional innovation. Farmers, timberworkers and miners will need to seek common ground and build alliances with others who have broader agendas (e.g., rural developers, environmentalists, human rights activists). Public and private sector scientists with an interest in agriculture, the environment and other rural related issues, will need to collaborate more in order to be fully aware of the broader consequences of their work. As a consequence, the charting of a new and more sustainable rural policy poses a tremendous challenge for everyone concerned about the future well-being of rural America.

REFERENCES

Batie, Sandra S. "Sustainable Development Challenges to the Agricultural Profession." *Amer. J. Agr. Econ.* 7(1989):1083-1101.

Brown, David L., J. Norman Reid, Herman Bluestone, David A. McGranahan and Sara Maxie, eds. *Rural Economic Development in the 1980's*. Washington, DC: ERS USDA, Sept. 1988.

Castle, Emery N. "Rural Economic Development Policies." Unpublished paper. Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University, 1992.

———. "Rural Diversity: An American Asset." *Annals of the Amer. Acad. Polit. and Soc. Sci.* 529(1993):12-21.

Deaton, Brady J., Glen C. Pulver, and Thomas R. Harris. "Rural Development and Human Resource Adjustment." *Food, Agriculture, and Rural Policy Into the Twenty-First Century*, ed. M.C. Hallberg, R.G.F. Spitze, and D.E. Ray, pp. 341-362. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994.

Eisgruber, Ludwig M. "Sustainable Development, Ethics, and the Endangered Species Act." *Choices*, Third Quarter, 1993, pp. 4-8.

Flora, Cornelia B., and James A. Christenson, eds. *Rural Policies for the 1990s*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991.

Fuller, Tony, Philip Ehrensaft, and Michael Gertler. "Sustainable Rural Communities in Canada." Paper presented at the Rural Policy Seminar, Saskatoon, Sask., Oct. 1989.

Helmers, Glenn A., and Dana L. Hoag. "Sustainable Agriculture." *Food, Agriculture and Rural Policy Into the Twenty-First Century*, ed. M.C. Hallberg, R.G.F. Spitze, and D.E. Ray, pp. 111-134. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994.

Hobbs, Daryl. "Rural Education." *Rural Policies for the 1990s*, ed. C.B. Flora, and J.A. Christenson, pp. 151-165. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991.

Jahr, Dale. *The Rural Political Economy*. Washington, DC: Joint Economic Committee, U.S. Congress, Senate, July, 1988.

Johnson, Kirk, and Rebecca Bauen. "Sustainability: Guiding Community Action." *The Changing Northwest*. Seattle, WA: The Northwest Policy Center, June, 1994.

AVAILABLE

Joint Economic Committee. *Towards Rural Development Policy for the 1990's: Enhancing Income and Employment Opportunities*. Washington, DC: U.S. Congress, Senate, Sept. 1989.

Long, Richard W., ed. *Education and Rural Economic Development*. Washington, DC: USDA ERS, 1991.

Pulver, Glen, and David Dodson. *Designing Development Strategies in Small Towns*. Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, 1992.

Reeder, Richard J., and Nina L. Glasgow. "Nonmetro Retirement Counties' Strengths and Weaknesses," pp. 12-17. *Rural Development Perspectives*. Washington DC: USDA ERS, May, 1990.

Stauber, Karl N. *Rural Development Overview*. Washington, DC: USDA, Apr. 1994.

U.S. General Accounting Office. *Rural Development: Rural America Faces Many Challenges*. Washington, DC: RCED, Nov. 1992.

_____. *Rural Development: Profile of Rural Areas*. Washington, DC: RCED, Apr. 1993.

U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Rural Conditions and Trends*. Washington, DC: ERS, Spring, 1993.

_____. *Rural Conditions and Trends*. Washington, DC: ERS, Summer, 1993.

_____. *Rural Conditions and Trends*. Washington, DC: ERS, Fall, 1993.

van Kooten, G. Cornelis. *Land Resource Economics and Sustainable Development*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 1993.